

# A Post-colonial Perspective on James Welch's "The Heartsong of Charging Elk"

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## *Abstract*

Drawing upon the works of Franz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Edward W. Said, this essay examines the construction of the post-colonial colonized subject through the eyes of the colonizer in James Welch's *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*. Furthermore, this essay addresses the doubling or trebling of identity construction/erasure created when Welch moves the main character, Charging Elk, from the United States to France.

Those post-colonial theorists who insist on a narrow definition of the term "post-colonial" do not consider Native American Literature post-colonial writing. For them, post-colonial only applies to literatures produced in colonies that have achieved independent nationhood status, a situation that does not apply to Native America. However, Native American literature does "fit" the broader definition of post-colonial, as literatures produced by marginalized peoples who have endured, and continue to endure, colonization.

In the essay, "What is Post(-)colonialism?," Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge challenge the accepted meanings of the term. They contend that there are two forms of post-colonialism, with the first form being "oppositional postcolonialism," which is found in its most overt form in post-independent colonies at the historical phase of "post-colonialism" (with a hyphen).<sup>1</sup> This definition is the standard version that excludes Native American texts on the

grounds that Native Americans have not achieved independent nation status, and, therefore, these writings are still located and submerged within the colonial experience.

This strict interpretation has the effect of further marginalizing works by an already marginalized people. With some notable exceptions, Native American literature is not included within the academy under the broader rubric of American Literature. Usually, Native American literature is offered as a separate section within English departments, American Studies departments, or Ethnic Studies departments. These literatures are considered included, but not canonical, separate, but not equal. While it is certainly useful to offer courses specific to Native American Literature (just as specific courses are offered in Chaucer or Shakespeare, for example), placing Native American literature within the broader category of post-colonialism brings Native American literature out of the margins and into the main stream.

Native American literature easily fits the second definition of post-colonialism offered by Mishra and Hodge, which is:

... equally a product of the processes that constituted colonialism but with a different inflection, is a 'complicit postcolonialism', which has much in common with Jean Francois Lyotard's unhyphenated postmodernism: an always present 'underside' within colonization itself.<sup>2</sup>

Even assigning Native American literature to the broader category, little has been published on post-colonialism within Native American writing. This is due not only to resistance from writers and academics within the field of post-colonialism, but also to resistance from Native American scholars and writers. The latter contend that the application of Euro-American post-colonial theory to Native American writing is yet another form of colonialism. I would agree that a broad application is not always useful or appropriate, however, until a theory specific to Native Americans (and possibly applicable to the writings of Maori and Australian Indigenous Peoples as well) is developed, a limited and selective use of Euro-American post-colonial literary theory is useful. The post-colonial literary theories of Edward W. Said, Homi Bhabha and Franz Fanon, for example, can be used effectively in analyzing James Welch's novel, *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*.<sup>3</sup>

In his groundbreaking text, *Orientalism*, Edward W. Said contends that the Orient(al) has been constructed, falsely so, through the lens of Western imperialism and ethno/geocentrism.<sup>4</sup> The application to Native Americans and Native American literature is obvious, but made more complex in Welch's text because Welch's main character leaves the United States and goes to Europe. The displacement of the main character is therefore doubled. The use of Said enables an examination of this character and text through this mirror of double distortion. Most of Welch's novel is set in France with flashbacks to Charging

Elk's childhood and early adulthood in the United States. The narrative offers ample evidence that the image of Native Americans in the late nineteenth century was an image constructed by the white colonizers, just as Said writes that the image of Orientals was, and is, constructed by the white Western world.

With his people confined to a reservation, an existence that Charging Elk cannot bear to consider, he joins Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and travels to Europe. In Marseilles, however, he and a fellow Lakota become ill and are taken to a local hospital. The Wild West Show moves on, leaving the two behind, and when Charging Elk's Lakota friend dies, the attending physician mistakenly writes Charging Elk's name on the death certificate instead of the other man's name. This "*mistake in identity*" is the first cause from which the rest of the book proceeds and the question of identity provides a deeper meaning for the character of Charging Elk, who serves here as a synecdoche for Native Americans in general. For much of the text, Charging Elk seems invisible to the whites that surround him. He is not a human, is rarely "seen" by the people he meets, and is only a problem to be solved by officials of the American Embassy, by the people he meets, and by the French judicial system. If the word "Native American" is substituted for "Orientals" in the following quote, we have Charging Elk's situation exactly. Said writes:

Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined or—as the colonial powers openly coveted their territory—taken over.<sup>5</sup>

While Charging Elk experiences all of the above from the people he meets in France, his questions of identity began before he left the United States. In one flashback, Charging Elk remembers attending school for a short time while he was at the Red Cloud Agency. He recalls the teacher showing the children a picture of a man that she called an Indian, and insisting that the children were the same as the picture, "Indians." The picture was of a wide hipped, narrow shouldered man wearing a leopard skin with odd features—a caricature of a Native American that looked nothing like the Lakota people.<sup>6</sup> It was an artificial construction of an Indian that had no point of identification for Charging Elk, and though it was obviously a false and distorted image, the white missionary teacher did not "see" the truth, did not see the Lakota as they really were even though they were right in front of her. She insisted upon seeing Indians as this constructed image, but because this image did not exist in reality, then she was not truly "seeing" Charging Elk, and he, insisting that the image is not of himself, could not make himself visible to the teacher. Charging Elk disappeared. The meaning of the image of the Indian, as Homi Bhabha puts it,

...as a point of identification—marks the site of an ambivalence. Its representation is always split—it makes present something that is absent – and temporarily deferred: it is the representation of a time that is always elsewhere, a repetition.<sup>7</sup>

Said describes the Eurowestern representation of the Orient and Orientals as a construction from a position of exteriority.<sup>8</sup> The Euro-American intellectuals who study, analyze, and write about the Orient have called themselves Orientalists; here again, one needs only to substitute “Native America” in the place of “Orient.”

Said writes that these intellectual studiers of culture are never concerned with the facts except as the first cause of what they are writing or studying. He states, “The principal product of this exteriority is of course representation,” and “. . . what is commonly circulated by it is not ‘truth’ but representations.”<sup>9</sup> The teacher’s picture of an Indian is a perfect example of an obviously false image, a representation, created by the white colonizer from a position of exteriority. The teacher insists upon the validity of the image, the first cause of what she is studying, and ignores the facts of the subjects themselves.

What is Charging Elk’s reaction to this doubling of image that also erases him? He does not possess the white man’s language, and so in the eyes of the white missionary teacher, he has no language. He is mute, silenced. He erases *himself* from the colonizers’ gaze by leaving the school, and later, by leaving his country to travel with the Wild West Show. Obviously, however, the image of the Indian that he is supposed to be but is not, disturbed him, rising as it does, in his memory many years later in his prison cell in France.

The disappearance of Charging Elk happens in his mind, but also in fact after he falls ill and becomes separated from the Wild West Show. After his escape from the hospital and before he is recaptured by the French police, Charging Elk is wandering the streets, confused and disoriented. His difference becomes apparent to him on the street when a child sees him and turns, terrified, to hide her face in her mother’s skirts. One is reminded of Franz Fanon’s writing of a similar situation in *Black Skin, White Masks*. In that text, a black man comes face to face with a white mother and child on the streets. The child cries: “Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!”<sup>10</sup> Fanon writes further:

Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema . . . it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person, but in a triple person . . . I was given not one, but three places. I had already stopped being amused. It was not that I was finding febrile coordinates in the world. I existed triply. I occupied space. I moved toward the other . . . and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea.<sup>11</sup>

Charging Elk exhibits a similar reaction. Welsh writes:

His stomach had tightened into a hard knot. . . He felt as miserable as he ever had in his life and he saw no end to his misery. He wished with all his being that he could step out of his body, leave the useless husk behind, and fly to the country of his people . . . at that moment, leaning against the building with his eyes closed to shut out the world around him, he would have gladly died, no matter what happened to his spirit.<sup>12</sup>

Recaptured and thrown into jail, Charging Elk languishes while the American Embassy makes feeble efforts to clarify his situation. Because his name is mistakenly written on the death certificate for the other Lakota who died in the hospital, Charging Elk has no legal existence under French law.

Charging Elk's release and subsequent placement with a French family are due to the efforts of a French journalist, who uses Charging Elk's story to boost his, the journalist's, career. The journalist's name, St. Cyr, sounds similar to the English word, sincere, but it is ironic because the journalist is far from sincere. He is only interested in boosting his career through the use of Charging Elk's story. St. Cyr wears a yellow jacket, so Charging Elk thinks of him as Yellow Breast, which is a Lakota term for the meadowlarks common on the plains of Dakota. These birds have a yellow breast and are often seen in the early morning. For Charging Elk, St. Cyr is an embodiment of this symbol of hope. For St. Cyr, Charging Elk is yet another image, a third image, of an item, an object of a story, and not human at all, and so here, we have another image beyond Bhabha's doubling of identity, to the trebling of identity described by Fanon.

After moving in with French family, Charging Elk begins to feel more secure, more comfortable with the French people than he felt back in the United States in the company of white English speaking people. Charging Elk, however, is unaware that much of this friendly feeling he has in the company of the French is, for the most part, not recognition of his humanity, but curiosity to see a genuine red man before they disappear, before they die out. As he becomes more confident and learns a bit more of the language, he dares to frequent small cafes. Here he meets with the more blatant form of discrimination that he has seen back in the United States. While eating at a café he frequents, a burly sailor challenges Charging Elk, who catches only occasional words such as "god damned" and "Indian." This singling out confuses him. Welch writes:

He understood why the wasicun miners in Paha Sapa hated him, but why would these sailors hate him in Marseilles? There were many people of many colors here. Why would they choose him? He had spent the past three winters making himself invisible, yet they knew him right away.<sup>13</sup>

What Charging Elk does not realize is that in France he has no power to make *himself* invisible, does not possess the power of self-erasure, cannot remove *himself* from view, as he did when he left the United States. That agency is reserved for the whites, whether they are United States whites or French whites, his identity, his existence can be fixed only in their gaze. He can only be an object, a representation of an Indian to be recognized or not at their whim. Convinced that he is going to be killed, he calmly sings his death song and rises from the table to face his fate, as a warrior of old would have done in the face of overwhelming odds, staking his sash to the ground.

His language and calm actions undermine the determined belligerence of the sailors, and while they stare in disbelief, two waiters evict Charging Elk from the café. His act of resistance restores his sense of self, at least temporarily. He takes this as a sign and himself as the signified, although he has not those words for the experience. Welch writes:

He hadn't become invisible as he had wished, but somehow the song had frozen the sailors, rendering them powerless in their effort to harm him . . . Perhaps he *was* meant to live, and to live here, at the edge of the great water that stood between him and his home. Perhaps this had become home.<sup>14</sup>

Bolstered by this successful resistance tactic, Charging Elk becomes bolder, braver in his attempt to assert self-identity, but it only leads to further disillusionment and pain. He begins to frequent a whore house, falling in love with a young prostitute. There he is spotted by a homosexual French businessman, Breteuil, who becomes infatuated with Charging Elk. Knowing that Charging Elk will not consent to a homosexual liaison, Breteuil forces Charging Elk's prostitute lover to help drug him. Regaining consciousness in the midst of this sexual act, Charging Elk murders Breteuil, is caught and sentenced to life in prison.

Breteuil is at once repelled and attracted by the dark skinned Native American, having first seen Charging Elk some years earlier. The Frenchman that Charging Elk stayed with for the first few years of his life in France was a fishmonger. Charging Elk helped out at the market stall where Breteuil, a chef, had been at the market buying food. Breteuil had tried unsuccessfully to lure Charging Elk away from the other Frenchman. Now at the whorehouse, Breteuil recalls that first meeting.

In an unguarded moment, he [Charging Elk] had looked right into Breteuil's eyes and made him look away. Breteuil had never looked away before—or since. He knew that he was quite beautiful and that men and women alike looked at him with admiration, often desire. He enjoyed staring their eyes away, so that they became confused and suddenly shy. He enjoyed his power to humiliate them, especially if

they were with their friends. But this Peau-Rouge had looked into his eyes as though he could see the very soul of Armand Beteuil.<sup>15</sup>

Here one is reminded of the little girl Franz Fanon writes of who exclaims, "Mother, look a Negro! I'm frightened!" and reminded again of the little girl who is frightened by Charging Elk and hides her face in her mother's skirts. The gaze of the colonized upon the colonizer is turned back, distorted, frightening. In discussion of Fanon's scene, Homi Bhabha writes:

The drama underlying these dramatic 'everyday' colonial scenes is not difficult to discern. In each of them the subject turns around the pivot of the 'stereotype' to return to a point of total identification. The girl's gaze returns to her mother in the recognition and disavowal of the Negroid type . . . In the act of disavowal and fixation the colonial subject is returned to the narcissism of the imaginary and its identification of an ideal ego that is white and whole.<sup>16</sup>

But for Breteuil, there is no white mother figure to turn to, to affirm his own identity. Breteuil flounders, feels displaced, a rich white man in a white man's country whose gaze upon the Other has been turned back by a dark skinned man, a man to whom Breteuil had felt physically attracted. Remember, no person, *not even a white person*, has ever withstood Breteuil's gaze. To quote Bhabha again:

. . . the disavowal of the Other always exacerbates the edge of identification, reveals that dangerous place where identity and aggressivity are twinned. For denial is always a retroactive process; a half acknowledgment of that otherness has left a traumatic mark.<sup>17</sup>

Charging Elk dared to *mimic* the white man's gaze, and in so doing has unwittingly created an identity for himself that challenges the identity of Breteuil. Mixed in equal parts with this identity challenge, is Breteuil's desire for the exotic Other. Breteuil is the ultimate white man, blond and blue-eyed, who prides himself on being the object of admiration and desire by both men and women. His desire for the dark-skinned Charging Elk, Breteuil's cultural and natural inferior is not reciprocated, however. When the two men meet again in the whorehouse, Charging Elk's attention, his gaze is fixed on a woman whom Breteuil disdains. By involving the woman in his scheme to drug and rape Charging Elk, Breteuil is avenging himself not only on Charging Elk, but also on the woman, the object of Charging Elk's desire.

Charging Elk's murder of Breteuil is not a victory for Charging Elk because he is arrested for murder. It is here the journalist, the insincere St. Cyr, reenters Charging Elk's life. The original story of Charging Elk's misfortune catapulted St. Cyr into a lucrative and respected career, and St. Cyr sees the continuation of

Charging Elk's story as a means to further his career. Although St. Cyr rallies public opinion through his newspaper column to find Charging Elk not guilty of the crime, the jury finds him guilty. However, the judge is swayed and instead of sentencing Charging Elk to death, he gives him life in prison. This is not a good decision for Charging Elk, but only another erasure by the white man. Too late, St. Cyr realizes his mistake when at the end of the trial, Charging Elk looks into St. Cyr's eyes. "St. Cyr knew why he didn't feel good. It was the eyes . . . They had already gone dead."<sup>18</sup>

For nine and a half years, Charging Elk disappears into the French prison system, where he tends the prison orchards and vegetable gardens, and then, a bureaucratic quirk revives him from non-existence. The French government has decided that Charging Elk is not a United States citizen. As a Native American he is a citizen of a different, though unspecified sovereign nation, and therefore should never have been subjected to a trial in France as a United States citizen. Charging Elk is pardoned and freed, and the Catholic Relief Society finds a job for him working for Vincent Gazier, a farmer who barely ekes out a living from a small orchard. Gazier, a cripple with a dying wife and a young daughter, does not "see" Charging Elk as a person, but as the help he desperately needs to work his orchards. The daughter, Nathalie, who spends most of her time caring for her invalid mother, lives in despair of ever having a husband and a normal life.

Charging Elk and Nathalie become friends, as Nathalie asks him questions about his life as a Native American back in the United States. Charging Elk sees Nathalie as the kind of woman he has always wanted for his own. He left the United States in part because he thought that would never be possible for him. He remembers a conversation where a friend of his expressed the feelings of both of them, when he said, "What good is this life we now lead? One day we will be old men and we will have nothing but memories of bad winters and no meat and no woman . . ."<sup>19</sup> Nathalie is the first person Charging Elk has met in France who sees him as a real person with a life and a history.

When Nathalie's ailing mother dies and her father becomes more distant, Nathalie turns to Charging Elk for friendship. When she finds herself falling in love with him, she begins to question the possibility of a relationship with someone so different. She analyzes her perceptions of Indians versus the reality of Charging Elk. She thinks:

She had seen illustrations of Indians in magazines, but they had feather headdresses and painted faces and carried hatchets or guns. More often than not, the faces were cruel, even inhuman. But Charging Elk was not cruel or inhuman. . . He was gentle, even pliable. . . Nathalie wondered what would happen if they walked along the promenade beside the Garonne in Agen. What would people think? . . . People would point at them, men and women would disapprove, young people would laugh at them behind their backs . . . about not being able to do better than a savage. . . There were only French people in Agen and



the countryside, and they were suspicious of, even hostile toward, anyone who was of a different color.<sup>20</sup>

Here, we have Nathalie, the young woman from France, comparing the picture of Indians to the reality in front of her, just as the missionary teacher had done back in the United States. However, Nathalie is able to discount the false image and accept the reality. Ultimately, she thinks:

Charging Elk *was* different. He was good, strong, and gentle at the same time. Shouldn't that be enough for her? . . . She resolved that next time it would be different—she would laugh with him, *look into his eyes*, [Emphasis added] touch him, perhaps even walk along the promenade with him. Who cared what other people thought?<sup>21</sup>

Nathalie is a White person unique in her historical time—she is able to gaze upon the dark-skinned colonized person and see a reflection of her own humanity looking back at her.

Charging Elk learns that he is to be sent back to Marseilles, and Gazier is planning to sell his farm and move with his daughter to Bordeaux. He gathers his courage and asks Gazier to be allowed to marry Nathalie. Gazier is horrified. He refuses the request with the excuse that Nathalie is too young for Charging Elk, but he thinks, “Charging Elk was a savage! The idea of the two of them together was absurd. Her life would be ruined—and so would his.”<sup>22</sup> It is unclear if Gazier means that Charging Elk's life would also be ruined or if Gazier's life would be ruined.

Charging Elk does not give up, and, a few days later, in the presence of Nathalie, he asks Gazier again, and Gazier does not answer but leaves the room. Gazier considers his own ill health and what will become of Nathalie, but still he thinks, “No, he couldn't allow this to happen to his daughter. But to marry a savage!”<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, concerned about his ill health and seeing Nathalie's obvious distress, Gazier gives in and grants his permission, but as he is toasting the health of the two, he thinks, “And may God and my dear wife forgive me.”<sup>24</sup> Gazier is never able to discount the representative image created by the White colonizer in favor of the reality.

It is through the (inadvertent) action of the colonizing state (in this case, France), that Charging Elk becomes a person. Welch, as the narrator, writes:

Charging Elk's pardon, which declared his rights and duties as a citizen of the Republic of France, served as his official papers. And so, by quirk of fate, he finally acquired his citizenship, as well as a bride.<sup>25</sup>

After the marriage, Charging Elk and Nathalie move to Marseilles and Charging Elk finds a job. There he goes to the fish market where the family he formerly stayed with has a stall and recognizes the man who had taken him into

his home years earlier but is too uncomfortable to speak to him. He also sees the man's son, Mathias, with whom Charging Elk used to play more than ten years previous, but Mathias does not acknowledge Charging Elk.

The narrator says, "When he [Charging Elk] thought of that day, he only saw the large brown eyes of Mathias looking at him without a hint of expression."<sup>26</sup> In spite of the camaraderie present when Charging Elk was a member of that household, the now-grown Mathias looks at Charging Elk with the gaze of the colonizer, and refuses to see himself looking back through Charging Elk's eyes.

Over a year later, the Wild West show comes back to Europe and Charging Elk goes to see it, knowing there will be Lakotas in the company. He meets with some Lakotas who know his family, and while talking with them, he discovers that the situation for his people in the United States has deteriorated even further during his absence. Knowing the true situation in his homeland, he chooses to stay in France, where he has acquired a wife who is now pregnant. He tells the Lakotas, "I speak the language of these people. My wife is one of them and my heart is her heart. She is my life now and soon we will have another life and the same heart will sing in all of us."<sup>27</sup> It is an act of resistance, a determination to construct an identity for himself in the place he now knows best, with the one White person who gazes upon him as a human being. It is not a hopeful ending, because Charging Elk is still unable to construct his own identity. Rather he must have it created for him, though this time as a positive identity, through the actions of the White colonizer.

### Notes

1. Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge, "What is Post(-) colonialism," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 284.
2. Ibid.
3. James Welch, *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).
4. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 206.
5. Ibid.
6. Welch, 56.
7. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 51.
8. Said, 20.
9. Ibid., 21.
10. Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 1967), 112.
11. Fanon, 121.
12. Welch, 43.
13. Ibid., 200.
14. Ibid., 204.
15. Ibid., 256.
16. Bhabha, 76.
17. Ibid., 62.
18. Welch, 343.
19. Ibid., 393.

20. Ibid., 388.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 394.
23. Ibid., 400.
24. Ibid., 403.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 412.
27. Ibid., 437.